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Matilal's Mission: A Memorial Address*

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Bimal Krishna Matilal was the third occupant of the Spalding Chair of Eastern Religions and Ethics; and his approach to his subject was as different from those of his two predecessors as theirs were from each other. It is of course in the nature of this very large and diverse subject to allow of such varied approaches: we must be grateful to those first three holders of the post that they did not follow one another to produce something which could come to be considered the Oxford approach to it, but demonstrated in their own work the variety of ways in which it could be studied. None of the three completed a full tenure of the Chair. The first occupant of the Chair left it to become, first Vice-President, then President, of India; but the other two were both taken by death in mid-career. The second was struck down suddenly – unexpectedly, except possibly by himself and his doctor; but Bimal Matilal suffered, with great courage, a very prolonged illness, which finally took him away before he had done all that he intended.

As you have heard, he did his original university work at Calcutta, took his doctorate at Harvard, went to Toronto through the standard course of promotion, and came to Oxford as Spalding Professor in 1976. From long before that, his preoccupation had been with the nature of Indian philosophy. That is entirely appropriate for a Professor of Eastern Religions, because the Indian religions at any rate – Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism – are, in their essence as religions, closer to philosophy than the Western religions, which I take to be Judaism and its successors, Christianity and Islam. If you look at the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Koran, you find in them very little, if anything, that could be called philosophical writing or in a philosophical style. In the cultures in which those were the prevailing religions, much philosophising has been carried out, some of it inspired by, some of it in the service of, some of it in reaction against, the dominant religion, but always moulded to some extent by the religious tradition. But the philosophy is not, as it were, implanted

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in the heart of the religion, whereas in the Indian scriptures there is much that is of a philosophical character or touches very directly upon a philosophical style of thought. So the question, "What is Indian philosophy, and how should it be evaluated?", is of crucial concern to anyone involved in studying Indian religion.

Anyone who asks that question, and especially an Indian who asks that question, has to confront a fact that still dominates the situation of Asian countries, where, now, "Asian" includes the Islamic world: the effect, namely, of European cultural imperialism, what the philosopher Edmund Husserl called "the Europeanisation of the earth". This fact is very familiar to us, one we take for granted: but I will cite two small things that bring it home quite vividly. Think of the clear application to people living in Asian countries of the term "Westernised" (Africa faces a different, perhaps more difficult, problem). Some people are Westernised, some are not Westernised; some are more Westernised, some are less Westernised. And now think how much you need to imagine for there to be an equally good sense in which one could talk about people living in Western countries as more or less Easternised. Again, think how we react to musicians from China or Japan who are highly proficient, perhaps superb, performers of Western classical music. We regard them without surprise, as a natural thing; but we should tend to view as eccentric a European who gave his life to Chinese or Japanese or Indian classical music, and displayed similar proficiency in performing it.

That, then, is a massive fact, which anybody has to face who is studying some aspect of traditional culture in any of those countries. And it applies to Indian philosophy as much as to any other aspect of culture in any other country. Not all empires have been cultural imperialists as well as political and military imperialists. Perhaps the Persian empire, at least under Cyrus, was not; and the Romans, as we know, sat at the feet of the Greeks. They adopted their literary and artistic forms; they even purloined their gods and their mythology - the Greeks whom they had conquered and whom they ruled. But European imperialism, from 1492 onwards, has been ruthlessly, relentlessly, culturally imperialist.

Even without imperialism, the increasing contacts and communication between different parts of the world would have brought about an impact of different cultures on one another, as indeed eastern cultures have, in different ways and at different times, impinged upon Western civilization. But the massive impact of Western culture upon the east has been all the more crushing because political hegemony accompanied the cultural imperialism. The effect of this has long outlasted the political and military hegemony. As a result, indigenous

traditions have been, not killed, but blanketed; and philosophy is a clear example. Doubtless this effect is irreversible in mathematics and the natural sciences, because of the nature of their development; and, because of their comparative aloofness from the general culture, it is perhaps not particularly lamentable in their case. But in all other aspects, including philosophy, it creates a problem. By "blanketing" I mean that the tradition did not die: it was, and still is, preserved. The pandits kept alive a continuous tradition of studying the Sanskrit texts and a tradition of interpreting them, and passed on this tradition to those whom they instructed. Bimal Matilal himself sat at the feet of at least two of those pandits. But the philosophical tradition was just being *preserved*. It was being handed down, without alteration, but not being added to; the creativity had gone. For the intellectual elite did not participate in the process; they had studied philosophy at the universities, but philosophy written in Greek, or English, or German, or Latin, or French, but not in Sanskrit. The philosophical formation, like the whole intellectual formation, was as it was because under the British raj an alien educational system had been imposed, and, with it, an alien intellectual tradition and orientation.

That is not to say Indian philosophy was not studied in the West. It was, indeed, by Orientalists, from the immortal Sir William Jones onwards, and particularly by German scholars. That is a tradition to be respected, and one that Bimal Matilal did respect. But it was part of Oriental studies: it was not part of philosophical studies. The Indian philosophical texts, like the scriptures, like the dramas, were studied by literary historians, by philologists, at best by students of comparative religion, but not by philosopher (Schopenhauer excepted). The history of philosophy can be properly studied only by philosophers. A philosopher does not ask, concerning a text, only "What does it mean?", let alone only. "What influences went into its formation?". He asks questions like, "Are the distinctions made correct distinctions?", "Are there other distinctions which should have been made but have been blurred?". "Are the arguments compelling?", and, ultimately, "Are the conclusions true?". The last is a question which, from a historian's point of view, or that of a philologist or literary critic, it is very naive to ask. Two or three years ago I was saying something along these lines, about mediaeval philosophy, to a young historian in this university; and she looked at me with wide eyes and said, "you don't believe in absolute truth, do you?". But a philosopher has to ask, "Is it true?"; and those who wrote the works of which he asks it were concerned precisely to arrive at the truth, or at a true understanding.

The evaluation of Indian philosophy that emerged from the study

of it by specialists in Indology was described by Professor Sen in his talk. A contrast was drawn between how philosophy was done in India and how it was done in the West. In India it was intuitive, mystical, synthetic; in the West rational, rigorous, analytic. Many members of the general intellectual public acquired the idea that all there was to Indian philosophy was the high metaphysics. Professor Sen spoke of this contrast as being drawn in a romantic spirit of admiration for the non-rational, intuitive Indian approach. But it was often drawn in the opposite spirit, to the detriment of Indian philosophy: Western philosophy showed itself much the superior, because truth can be attained only by rigorous, rational intellectual analysis, as practised in the Western, but not the Indian , tradition. This contrast was accepted by many Indian intellectuals, including professional philosophers who had not studied the indigenous tradition very closely. They of course interpreted it to the advantage of Indian philosophy. Western philosophy is desiccated, they thought; it cuts things up fine and destroys the life in them; it ignores other methods of perceiving the truth, intuitive methods exploited in the Indian tradition.

Bimal Matilal set his face against these views. He believed that the contrast embodied a total misunderstanding of the history and character of Indian philosophy. He set himself to remove this misconception of the nature of Indian philosophy, in two ways. First, to emphasise that by no means all Indian philosophy was the high metaphysics: just as in Western philosophy, there was a great deal of the more down-to-earth parts of the subject – logic, grammar (not clearly demarcated from philosophy in this tradition), the theory of knowledge, philosophy of mind, problems of personal identity. Secondly, this was pursued with quite as much analytic application of purely rational methods as in Western philosophy. Naturally, there were different formulations and different ways of arguing the questions; but the rational/intuitive contrast was, for him simply a mistake. Indeed, as he announced in his inaugural lecture, even in the high metaphysics there was much analytical rigour.

Bimal Matilal worked almost obsessively at this mission. It was not a mission to explain Indian philosophy to the West, because the explanation was as much addressed to colleagues in India, who were themselves in part victims of the misinterpretation he attacked, as to Western philosophers who had known virtually nothing about the subject. He worked untiringly at completing this mission, so much so that in the last year of his painful illness, almost to the moment of his death, he continued to work as hard as he could, with the sense of having to accomplish as much as possible in the time left to him. I hope he did not die with a sense of a mission unfulfilled. If he had

been spared, he would have done a great deal more, very interesting and illuminating, work. He had nevertheless accomplished the main mission he had set himself. He had succeeded in establishing beyond any shadow of doubt the principal thesis that he wanted to maintain about the nature of Indian philosophy. That achievement was very nearly single-handed and we must remember it with very great gratitude. He showed, not only something about Indian philosophy, but that it was possible to speak from that base in a manner intelligible to contemporary analytic philosophers, and to discuss philosophical problems with them from the two respective bases, because the problems were in common, and the methodology was essentially the same, too. He proved that, and our conception of Indian philosophy – the Indian conception of Indian philosophy, also - will never be quite the same again.

No doubt he wanted to achieve something more than that; not only to demonstrate that communication was possible between the two traditions, not only to establish the character of Indian philosophy, but to bring it into the syllabus, as it were, that is, to induce Western philosophers to study it, no doubt in translation, as they study Aristotle, Kant, Descartes or Leibniz. If so, I doubt whether one man could have accomplish that. In this University, we ignore large swathes of our own philosophical tradition. The Philosophy Sub-Faculty keeps complaining that we have no-one save the overworked Dr. Kenny to teach mediaeval philosophy. They recognise that it is worth studying, that mediaeval philosophers made serious contributions, that there ought to be someone who knows about it and can teach it: but do they themselves read the mediaeval philosophers? They do not. They would do so only if work of high quality was presented to them that rested on mediaeval philosophy, which they would need to read in order to understand it; and the same is true of any other philosophical writings not at present studied. We ought, therefore, not to regret that Bimal Matilal only took some first essential steps towards the distant goal of bringing say, Udayana or Dharmakirti into the syllabus in this sense; and I trust that he did not die under the illusion that, had he lived, he would have reached that goal.

So, while we are all deeply sad that he was taken from us when he was, we should celebrate his great achievement while he was here as Professor, and he grateful for the immense contribution he made to our understanding of Indian thought and how it underlies Indian religious sensibility as well.